



Sense of Place

A Discussion Paper of Energy Aware Communities

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Brief: Community sense of place is an important aspect of life, although it can be challenging to describe. Having a sense of place encourages involvement within the community and helps people create neighborly bonds. It encourages people to be involved, to enjoy where they live or work, and to interact more with their surroundings. Having a sense of place fosters a safe environment for all. When a sense of place is achieved, and people want to live and work in a certain community or area, there can be energy savings that result. In compact communities, energy savings can result from variable housing sizes and types, more non-motorized or public transportation options, and from mixed-use development patterns.¹ If we have a real sense of place we gain more satisfaction from our environment and may be more willing to accept a higher density, mixed use, walkable community.

Problem

As our society grows, the less and less social interaction we may actually have. Many people in our younger generations have more friends in social media websites than they actually have in real life. Fewer children seem to play outside after school, opting for more solitary indoor activities, such as watching television or playing video games. For some, the feeling that we belong to a community or neighborhood is

¹ Additional papers are provided in the Energy Aware Communities webpage discussing these other attributes

becoming a thing of the past. Places that lack a sense of place are sometimes referred to as placeless or inauthentic. These landscapes are those that have no special relationship to the places in which they are located. They could be anywhere; roadside strip shopping malls, gas stations and convenience stores, fast food chain restaurants, and chain department stores are often cited as examples of placeless landscape elements. Often chain stores use a standardized architectural style in multiple communities, leaving people with a somewhat homogenous feeling, with no real distinction between communities. Even some more established sites or districts have become heavily commercialized for tourism. A classic description of such placeless places is Gertrude Stein's "there is no there there".



Neighborhood sign, Olympia, WA

Introduction

The term sense of place has been defined and used in many different ways by different people. To some, it is a characteristic that some geographic

places have and some do not, while to others it is a feeling or perception held by people and not by the place itself. It is often discussed in relation to those characteristics that make a place special or unique, as well as to those that foster a sense of authentic human attachment and belonging.

One definition of sense of place is that a place comes into existence when humans give meaning to a part of the larger, undifferentiated space. Any time a location is identified or given a name, it is separated from the undefined space that surrounds it. Some places, however, have been given stronger meanings, names or definitions by society than others. Places said to have a strong "sense of place" have a strong identity and character that is deeply felt by local inhabitants and by many visitors.

Sense of place is a social phenomenon that exists independently of any one individual's perceptions or experiences, yet is dependent on human engagement for its existence. Such a feeling may be derived from the natural environment, but is more often made up of a mix of natural and cultural features in the landscape, and generally includes the people who occupy the place.

For example, Trinity, North Carolina is undertaking a Center City Plan process. They are publicly discussing why urban design and placemaking is important. Materials on their website describe it as, "the art of making places for people." They recognize the successful examples in surrounding communities but highlight that, "it is important that

Trinity establishes an identity that is unique and appropriate to our culture and history." For more information about Trinity's efforts, please visit www.trinity-nc.gov and click on Center City Plan.

Sense of place may not have a direct association with energy use or its generation. However, we specifically include it in this series about energy aware communities. This is because as we encourage communities to increase density and intensity within urban areas, through infill or other compact growth strategies, we want to note the importance of keeping (or making) them places where people want to live, work, and recreate. Sense of place, while often challenging to plan for and implement, is a vital component of community.

An important component when creating sense of place is urban design. Urban design considers the aesthetics of places but also much more. It involves the way a place makes one feel, how places connect, and how buildings interact with the public realm (such as sidewalks, views from parks or plazas, access from streets and transit stops, etc.).

Implementation Considerations

Understanding how sense of place develops and changes is relevant to understanding how people interact with their environment in general and considering how this interaction may become more sustainable. For these reasons, human geographers and social

psychologists have studied how a sense of place develops, including the importance of comparisons between places, learning from elders and observing natural disasters and other events. Of particular note is the importance of childhood experiences.

The special bond which develops between children and their childhood environments has been called a 'primal landscape' by human geographers. This childhood landscape forms part of people's identity and constitutes a key point of comparison for considering subsequent places later in life.



Benches and public art in downtown Ellensburg

What types of places, or urban amenities and locations within the community, should be considered and planned for? Sense of place must be locally determined and will be different in each community.

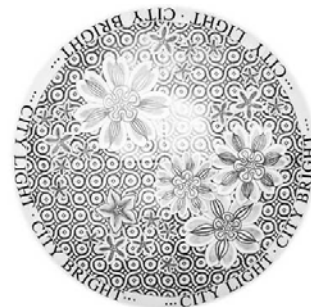
For some jurisdictions, a strong theme (such as Leavenworth's Bavarian architectural style) gives multiple opportunities to create sense of place. Many beach communities can make use of a destination getaway theme, or a vibrant urban waterfront place. Other communities, without a distinct geographic setting to build from, may benefit from creating public

spaces (e.g., a farmer's market, town square or plaza) or protect elements of the natural environment (tree protection ordinances that require preserving certain trees during development). Still others will focus on downtown area enhancements, such as provision of benches, hanging flower baskets, and banners from street lights in a defined area.

Many of these or similar strategies are available for urban, suburban, and rural settings.

In [*Pedestrian- and Transit-Friendly Design: A Primer for Smart Growth*](#), author Reid Ewing outlines how urban design differs from planning. Ewing highlights elements of successful urban design to create spaces that are inviting for pedestrians and transit users. The guide provides examples as well as photographs and illustrations of essential features.

There are also relatively low cost and low maintenance options a community can take to highlight an area, such as downtown. Some cities have distinct manhole covers made, enhance street signage design, or find creative ways to engage with pedestrians. For example, the Downtown Spokane Partnership added "mini-maps" to the sidewalks at intersections throughout the downtown.



Hatchcover Art in Seattle, Seattle City Light

Examples

The **City of Kirkland** is known for its pedestrian-oriented, walkable downtown. Residents and visitors make use of frequent and well marked crossings and a complete sidewalk network. Kirkland has a “PedFlag” program, which provides bright yellow flags that pedestrians can carry or wave while crossing streets.



Pedestrian Flags at crosswalks in Kirkland

The **Town of Waterville** added a large statue at the town's main entrance along Highway 2. In addition, Waterville added hanging flower baskets along its main street.

The **City of Ellensburg** has a quaint and charming downtown. The amenities, such as pedestrian scale lighting, benches, clocks, and mailboxes make it a pleasant place to spend time. The on-street parking and short blocks make walking an easy choice for most visitors. In addition, the downtown manages distinction from the college but

remains welcoming to students as well as permanent residents.



Clock at intersection, downtown Ellensburg

The **City of Vancouver** has focused attention on the Esther Short Park. The park is a community gathering place for the farmer's market and other events.



Farmers Market at Esther Short Park, Vancouver, WA

There are many opportunities to make public spaces and communities more memorable and enjoyable. These can be relatively simple, such as adding colorful banners to downtown area street lighting poles. Some jurisdictions may choose to change the banners seasonally, or add American flags

during certain holidays, such as Fourth of July and Veteran's Day. Adding flowering hanging baskets in summer can be a great way to enhance aesthetics, but provisions must be made for watering and maintenance. Working with a downtown association or chamber to facilitate any such enhancements may be an option.

Other strategies, such as installing welcome signs, neighborhood signs, public art, community clocks, or public plazas will likely require more planning and investment.

So, while sense of place does not directly tie to energy, communities that create a sense of place are likely to attract infill and redevelopment projects, contain densities that support transit, and promote walking and bicycling as transportation modes.

Additional Resources

Making Sense of Place, Portland, OR, YouTube [video](#)

[Eleven Principles for Creating Great Community Places](#), Project for Public Spaces

Ewing, Reid. [Pedestrian- and Transit-Friendly Design: A Primer for Smart Growth](#)

[Sense of Place: Create Paradise Where You Are](#), Online TDM Encyclopedia, Victoria Transport Policy Institute

City of Kirkland, [Pedestrian Flags FAQ](#)
Smart Growth Online, [Foster Distinctive, Attractive Communities with a Strong Sense of Place](#)

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